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Self-Publish or Perish!

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Self-Publish or Perish!

What is so great about getting published by a mainstream publisher? First of all, you have to locate a literary agent; or they won’t even look at your manuscript. No more “over the transom” surprise blockbusters. Plus locating a literary agent is almost as hard as finding a publisher once was. Perhaps publishers are wary of looking at your book for fear of a law suit if they publish something similar in the future, or they might just feel inundated with stuff and want the books vetted by someone in the industry. Did I say industry? Publishing is first and foremost a business, and your book will be looked at only if it has commercial potential.

Once your Great American Novel or History of Bean Sprout Farming is finally released, your publisher will love you for about a week before focusing attention on the “Next Big Thing.” Mark Pendergrast, a former academic acquisition librarian and acquaintance, wrote a fascinating social history of Coca Cola entitled For God, Country, and Coca Cola. His publisher dutifully put it in their seasonal catalog, sent out review copies to the trade, and had their reps show the book to bookstore buyers while on their rounds. After that week-long blitz, he was on his own. His publisher had moved on to promote the next book in its list. Mark tried visiting bookstores to promote his book at his own expense. He even had to buy copies of his book to show to prospective buyers. His profit per book sold was under a dollar. If you’re not good at marketing and publicity, that may be the way to go.

Delays in publishing can be a real issue. My most recent manuscript for a traditional library book publisher went to the publisher in March 2012. It was through all editorial processes by September 2012. As of this date (April 2013), I’m still waiting for it to appear. It was based on large-scale, somewhat time-sensitive research done in the late fall of 2011. By the time it does emerge, the research will be more than a year old. That may or may not be a problem for this particular book. I would regard it as a major problem for a book like Give Us a Dollar: It doesn’t have to be that way; but, when you work with a traditional publisher, you have little (if any) control over the scheduling.

Decisions and Unknowns

The final answer can only be: It’s complicated.

If you’re an experienced writer, have honest friends, who will review your work, or be willing to pay for an editor (and possibly a copyeditor as well), if you use my template (The Librarian’s Guide to Micropublishing points to it) or build your own and if you pay attention, you can produce a professional-quality book and get it into self-publication rapidly.

If you’re good at marketing and publicity, that may be the way to go.

If you’re not so good at marketing and publicity, if your words need professional help, or if you’re not willing to deal with the detail work of getting layout right, then you should stick with a traditional publisher.
that part of my marketing responsibilities as a vendor required me to frequently bring print jobs to Collective Copies in Florence, Massachusetts. They are a worker-owned collective that does excellent printing and copying work. On one visit, I noticed that they were printing and marketing books for their customers. So when I approached Steve Strimer with my clutch of stories, he was ready to work with me. I had already delivered my manuscript to Toni Brannili, a friend, as well as writer, book editor, and one time legal counsel for the Writers’ Guild. She was kind enough to read my manuscript and saved me from inflicting some real howlers on my unsuspecting readers. I then handed off the edited manuscript on a flash drive to Collective Copies. They took care of all of the formatting and printing. From drop off to finished product was less than two weeks. Steve had chosen some beautiful paper (Mohawk Vellum Cream); the typeface looked great too (Bembo). I was now the proud father of fifty handsome copies of my little book. I could order them in twenty-five copy increments. The texts were stored on the print shop computer and could be printed “on demand.” I also kept back up files on a CD.

When I self-published with Collective Copies, I was responsible for my own editing and cover art; but Toni had volunteered to be my editor. I also produced my own cover by using public domain art. With all that work done, the final cost to publish each book of ninety pages was under five dollars. For around two hundred and fifty dollars, I now owned fifty copies of an eminent block buster. Collective Copies placed it in their three shops, an excellent beginning as they are popular haunts of many book dealers, librarians and customers. I published my books several years ago (2004, 2006, and 2010 with more to come in the future). The self-publishing world has changed drastically in just that short period. I published first in print and then a few years later made digital copies available through Amazon Kindle. Collective Copies charged me two hundred dollars to format three books for upload to Kindle. Nowadays I would recommend that self-published authors go directly to digital and provide a print option for those who want it. What has changed most is that you can now publish direct to digital with many companies and then have them make print-on-demand copies available for the print market. With Amazon, you can publish for free on Kindle Direct and then have them create a print copy for sale on the Amazon Website through their CreateSpace subsidiary. Publishing a book is as easy as creating a Word file and uploading it according to their specifications. However easy Amazon makes the whole process, you are still limited to their proprietary Kindle service. Other companies, such as Lulu and Smashwords, will make your book available simultaneously on all devices from Nook to Apple to Kindle.

Another bit of advice is to not invest too heavily in all the add on services that self-publishing companies offer. Just like a new car dealership, they make most of their money on expensive options. Do your own editing. Get an artist friend to create your cover. Make sure the cover has high impact as it will usually be displayed as a thumbnail picture online.

Use all types of social media to introduce and promote your book. Make a YouTube video where you read and talk about your book. Make it short: two minutes is good. Set up a Facebook page for your book. Create a blog and Website for your book. Get friends and colleagues to review your book on Amazon. Donate free copies to your local libraries.

It’s not that there are too many self-published books or that they are inherently of a lesser quality. The problem with self-published books is that most people try to write a best-seller. Leave that to Grisham, Cornwell, etc. Write on a topic you know and care about. That is how you will find readers. Plus commercial publishers might find you after you have self-published and established a “platform” of readers.

More advice to aspiring authors: Make sure you like your own writing. Write first for yourself. Your knowledge and enthusiasm will translate into a fresh experience for others. Writer Cyril Connolly said: “Better to write for yourself and have no public than to write for the public and have no self.” Remember that J.D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac were rejected hundreds of times before they were published and that Virginia Woolf, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner were all self-published authors at one time. Release your inner artist. Become immortal. Self-publish!

For further reading:

My books:
Else Fine: Little Tales of Horror from Libraries and Bookshops (2004; Print and Kindle editions)
The Parrot’s Tale (2006; Print and Kindle editions)
Superpostapocalypticpseudondocious (2010; Print and Kindle Editions)
The Mighty Charleston Players Present Their Greatest Hits 2007-2012.Written with Eleanor Cook (2012; Available from Busca, Inc. and Amazon)

Rumors from page 14
the way through southwest Ireland and I didn’t fall off the horse once! Memories!

Speaking of memories. I remember when Don Beagle (one of the authors in this issue) and his lovely wife visited Charleston. Did you know that Don used to work at the Charleston County Library? I remember that Don developed one of the very first apps (before they were even invented) about Charleston. And he even posted some of the material from a walking tour of the College of Charleston that I did many years ago with Patrick Squires, Azaleas and Stucco. Of course, it’s totally outdated now and long out of print.

One of our colleagues at the College of Charleston, Jolanda-Pietra van Arnhem and Jerry Spiller have just published a paper, “Let’s Not Meet: Making the Most of Time with Asynchronous Collaboration,” in Time and Project Management Strategies for Librarians edited by Carol Smallwood; Jason Kuhl; & Lisa Fraser and just out from Scarecrow Press. Joey (that’s Jolanda’s real name) is getting ready to finish her library degree at the University of South Carolina which she has managed to do while holding down three full-time jobs! Hooray for Joey and Congratulations! PS Jerry already has an MLS!

More congratulations are due as well to Lindsay Barnett who recently joined the staff of Technical Services at the Addlestone Library. Lindsay just graduated from Library School in May! And she has been working for us for the past year. Great having so many new library school graduates for us old codgers to learn from! Lindsay plans to start continued on page 24